

Reminiscences of the Battle of Pleasant Hill

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REMINISCENCES OF THE BATTLE OF PLEASANT HILL.

BY HENRY H. CHILDERS.

After an absence of many years, I returned to the old scenes and associations of the battle-field of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana. It was in the month of May, 1895, and just in time to see the dismantled remains of the old mansion, known to history as the Childers House, which during the battle of Pleasant Hill, on the ninth day of April, 1864, was the headquarters of Gen. N. P. Banks, commanding the Union forces.

Mr. W. D. Gooch, who had married one of the Childers girls, had become the owner of the house and had decided to tear it down and remove such portions as were useful in the construction of a more modern home at the nearest railroad station, called by the Railroad Company, Sodus, and by the Post-office Department, Pleasant Hill. The owner, at first, resolved to leave the old home standing and would go to and fro from the railroad station, a distance of two and a half miles, every day to business. This became inconvenient and he left the old homestead to a care-taker and moved into a less pretentious cottage nearer his business. On this particular day in May, while I was standing looking at what remained of the home of my early childhood and cast down with sadness at the fate of this historic relic, I asked Mr. Gooch why he had not made a proposition to the United States Government to sell the homestead and the adjoining battle-field as a Government Reservation. It seems that he had this very thing in contemplation, but as the Government had moved slowly, as is usual in such cases, he got out of patience and decided to put the building to a practical use, but learned after demolition had begun that if he had waited a little longer, the Government would have taken action.

In giving my recollections of the battle of Pleasant Hill, I rely upon a fair memory of things seen myself and other things told me during and after the battle. I shall, also, attempt to add to the value of these reminiscences by appealing

to the official records compiled by the United States Government.

I distinctly remember, as a child, hearing my grandmother, Mrs. Maria Childers, the owner of the Childers homestead, speak of the war that was then going on and when the Red River Campaign began, we received reports at different times from passers-by of the progress of the Union army up the Red River valley. We either heard or thought we heard, cannonading just a few days before the battle of Mansfield which was fought on the 8th of April, 1864, and I remember going out into the back yard and putting my ear to the earth, as I was told in that way one could hear the cannon detonations from a long distance.

The first real demonstration which excited us, was the day before the battle of Mansfield when the picket lines of the Confederate army were driven past our house in the usual disorder of such skirmishes and pretty soon the blue uniforms of Yankee officers appeared in our little back yard under the China trees, on horseback. The exercise these officers had taken that morning had given them an appetite and they demanded victuals. My grandmother, at first, did not think that she could afford to furnish food energy to the enemy but a certain wise discretion accompanied with some premonition, persuaded her that she had better feed these men. After eating, they proceeded to inquire for money and valuables and received unsatisfactory answers. The silverware and other valuable articles were then in the bottom of a six-hundred barrel oblong cistern under the house. They searched all the rooms and in demeanor were not as polite and chivalrous to these frightened southern women and children as I fancy United States officers would be to-day under like circumstances. In their search, they found a rosewood box inlaid with pearl, which aroused considerable curiosity. It was locked and no one seemed to know where the key was. They thought that if the box contained a pistol, it must be a very fine one to be in keeping with the expensive character of the box itself. They rattled the box and finally broke the lock and found a very expensive old heirloom, a hunting

horn, for which they had no use. Soon after they had left the house, the soldiery began to pass on their way to Mansfield. Not having had a military training, either in school or in the National Guard, I cannot describe military movements as felicitously as I would like, but I will simply give my reflections as they occur to me.

The two armies met in the old Jordan field to the west of our house which had been for some years abandoned on account of the exhausted condition of the soil and the first I recall of the actual engagement was when I saw the soldiers marching in line westward, immediately in front of the yard which we always called the flower yard. Soon after, came the rapid firing of musketry and the less rapid cannon. Our family had been told by wiser ones that it would be safer in the cellar which was in the rear of the house and there, all the family and the slaves took refuge. For my part, I did not venture out of the cellar, but Henry Taylor, one of our negro boys, went to the front of the house where he could see the battle raging and soon returned with a report that a bomb-shell had hit the house. This caused great alarm, as we thought it meant an explosion and burning down of the house. When we heard no explosion, we were satisfied that Henry's imagination was alone responsible for the statement that the house had been struck. However, an examination after the battle, showed that a ten-pound round bomb had struck the house and passed through several walls, shattering several pieces of furniture and lodging itself between the ceiling, without the more serious damage of explosion. Numerous smaller balls struck the house but no member of the family was hurt. While the battle was in progress, Mrs. Childers took two of the servants and removed from one of the front rooms down stairs, a sick Confederate soldier. No sooner had this been done than a ball passed through the wall just over the place where the sick man had been.

Soon after the battle, the house began to fill up with the wounded and by night it was a veritable hospital, all the halls and rooms being utilized, except two bed-rooms, dining-room and kitchen. I remember one soldier who was brought

in shot through the head. He seemed to be aware that his end was near and begged that he be put out of his misery. He died very soon afterwards. A very amusing incident happened in the course of the afternoon: peeping out from the cellar, we could see soldiers fleeing through the fields in the rear, but in the nick of time, we happened to see old Aunt Sally, who was the cook at the tavern on the hill, making her way to the woods. Our boy Henry ran out and hailed her and brought her in and gave her refuge. She was very grateful but could not explain how she had covered the ground almost between the lines without being killed.

One of the strangest things about this battle was that neither Rebel nor Yankee knew which was "licked" and it was a case of both armies retreating and the confession of weakness on both sides, but the real vantage ground was held by the Rebels, as the Union army had intended to reach Shreveport and never did. On the contrary, the day after the battle found them twenty miles further from their destination. This battle marked the climax in the disastrous failure of the Red River Campaign where plans were carefully made but poorly executed, where man proposes and God disposes.

By some strange act of omission, little has been recorded, either in history or biography, and for that matter even in the official records, concerning this battle, though there were in the Red River Campaign approximately, fifty thousand men.

The most reliable information I have found in the Official Record of the Union and Confederate armies. Gen. Richard (Dick) Taylor, touches lightly upon this battle in his book "Destruction and Reconstruction," which has had but few readers above "Mason and Dixon's Line." The only way in which I can account for this omission is the remote distance of the battle from military centers. Books have been written upon Manassas, Bull Run, Gettysburg, Antietam, Richmond, Vicksburg and other battles. General Banks spoke of this in one of his reports, April 13, 1864, as "more sanguinary and desperate, for the brief period it con-

tinued than any engagement in which they (the soldiers) have ever participated."

Troops from Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri on the Confederate side and from New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Maine, Illinois, Indiana and some other states, participated in this engagement, which was fought between the hours of four and seven P. M., April 9, 1864, Gen. N. P. Banks on the Union and Gen. Dick Taylor the Rebel side. General Banks was under orders from Lieut. Gen. U. S. Grant, and General Taylor was subordinate to Gen. E. Kirby Smith, commanding the trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate service. This was one of a series of engagements including the battles of Mansfield and Wilson's Farm (three miles northwest of Pleasant Hill), which with other circumstances, decided the War Department at Washington to abandon this part of the field of operation and to concentrate the Government forces at points further east.

I have above spoken of the doubtful issue of this battle and the uncertainty in the minds of the commanding officers as to which army had been victorious, but even with this frank statement, I am convinced that the Union army was in a much more demoralized condition than the enemy. General Banks seemed to have been the victim of a profound quandary, vacillating and without resolution. His embarrassment was so apparent that he has confessed the same in a letter addressed to General Grant from Grand Ecore, La., April 13, 1864, in the following language:

At the close of the engagement, the victorious party found itself without rations and without water. To clear the field for the fight, the train had been sent to the rear upon the single line of communication, through the woods, and could not be brought to the front during the night. There was neither water for man nor beast, except such as the now exhausted wells had afforded during the day, for miles around.

* * * These considerations, the absolute deprivation of water for man or beast, the exhaustion of rations and the failure to effect the connection with the fleet on the river, made it necessary for the army, although victorious in the terrible struggle through which it had passed, to retreat to a point where it would be certain in communicating with the fleet and where it would have an opportunity of reorganization.

Another thing which added to General Banks' confusion was the limitation put upon the campaign by Gen. U. S. Grant which he thought could be successfully fought within thirty days. At the time of the retreat from Pleasant Hill, it was contemplated in the original plan that the Union army would be in Shreveport after a victorious march up the Red River valley. Touching this point, General Grant at the time gave the following instructions:

Should you find that the taking of Shreveport will occupy ten or fifteen days more (than the prescribed thirty days) time than Gen. Sherman gave his troops to be absent from their command, you will send them back at the time specified in his note of ——— March, *even if it should lead to the abandonment of the main object of the expedition.* Should it prove successful, hold Shreveport and Red River with such force as you deem necessary and return the balance of your troops to the neighborhood of New Orleans.*

It is not difficult to imagine the humiliation from which General Banks was suffering at the close of the battle when he was sure of defeat, which not only meant the loss of that particular battle but the miscarriage of his plans of reaching Shreveport within thirty days. Confronted by such conditions, he called a council of war in the evening which met in our house (the Childers house). As far as can be learned, this council was attended by Generals Banks, Emory, Dwight and Franklin. The result of this meeting was a decided vote to retreat, in which determination Gen. A. J. Smith of General Sherman's army, acquiesced. (General Smith and his troops had been loaned to the Dept. of the Gulf, temporarily, and for the purposes of this campaign.)

Another embarrassment which General Banks may have urged by way of excuse in the fortunes of war just at this time, was the tardy movements of the fleet commanded by Rear-Admiral Porter in its journey up Red River upon which General Banks seems to have relied for assistance. To use General Banks' own language:

The fleet was as necessary to the campaign as the army. Had it been left to my discretion, I should have reluctantly undertaken, in a campaign requiring but eight or ten light-draft gun-boats, to force

*Official Records, Vol. XXXIV, p. 203.

twenty heavy iron-clads, 490 miles on a river, proverbially as treacherous as the Rebels who defended it and which had given notice of its character by steadily falling, when, as the Admiral reports, "All other rivers were booming." There is a better reason for the disregard of the palpable difficulties of navigation than the over zealous council of officers in nautical affairs.

The attitude of these two commanders, naval and military, toward one another would be amusing, if not so tragic. We can at any rate, at this remote time, find comedy in the situation. General Banks was furious with General Porter's tardy movement of the fleet; General Porter was complacent and conciliatory.

Note General Banks' irritation in the following language:

In a subsequent despatch, Admiral Porter says that: "All my vessels navigated the river to Grand Ecore, with ease, and with some of them I reached Springfield Landing, the place designated for the gun-boats to meet the army. *My part was successfully accomplished.* The failure of the army to proceed and retreat to Grand Ecore, left me *almost* at the mercy of the enemy." The records of the campaign do not at all support the reckless and fiery ardour of this statement. The fleet did not reach the "place appointed," until two full days after the first decisive battle with the enemy. The Admiral occupied four days in moving 104 miles on what he called a "rising river" with "good water," to the place appointed.*

Admiral Porter seems to have been a trifle more amiable than his confrere General Banks. In his letter of May 16, 1864, addressed to Hon. Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, he says:

To Gen. Banks, personally I am much indebted for the happy manner in which he followed this enterprise, giving it his whole attention night and day, scarcely sleeping while the work was going on, tending personally to see that all the requirements of Col. Bailey were complied with on the instant. I do not believe there was ever a case where such difficulties were overcome in such a short space of time and without any preparation.

This tribute to General Banks' military prowess is so fulsome and in such contrast with the opinions expressed by General Banks on Admiral Porter's naval movements, that accuracy is discounted.

*Official Records, Vol. XXXIV, p. 215.

While these commanders were expressing divergent views, all things were not harmonious between Generals E. Kirby Smith and Dick Taylor, of the Confederate army.

There is good reason to believe that General Taylor engaged the enemy at Mansfield on April 8, 1864, against the advice of his superior officer, General Smith, and the movements of General Taylor's army, immediately subsequent to the battle, were not in accord with General Smith's directions.

I find the following language in a letter dated Shreveport, La., June 27, 1864, from Lieut. Edward Cunningham, Aide-de-Camp and Chief of Artillery, which was intercepted *in transitu* and was forwarded to the United States War Department by General Canby:

I have given you as clearly as I am able the details of this campaign. I doubt if they will be interesting to you in view of the great event now transpiring in Virginia and Georgia; but as I have said, they are data from which you may judge the merits of the case, which I am sure will not long fail to be discussed in Richmond. Gen. Taylor has warm supporters there—men who will not be deterred from carrying their point by any scruples of honor or veracity. Gen. Smith's policy and motives, as well as many facts connected with his operations, will be misrepresented, etc.

I have wondered at a statement which General Banks made in a letter from Grand Ecore, La., dated April 13, 1864, to General Grant (Official Report, Vol XXXIV, p. 183) in which he says: "The battle lasted until nine o'clock in the evening." Everyone knows that it is dark at this season of the year at seven o'clock, and I remember that the firing ceased at dark. This mistake may be attributable to hallucinations growing out of great excitement and greater disappointment, tremendous losses of troops, the humiliation of defeat and responsibility to higher authority, thereby unbalancing his judgment.

There seems to have been considerable difference of opinion as to the number of troops on both sides in this engagement. The Federals claimed that the Confederates fought with something near twenty-five thousand troops, while the Federal estimate was twelve thousand. The Confederate estimate of the Union forces was twenty-five thousand men. Gen-

eral Banks said in a letter: "We have fought the battle of Pleasant Hill with about fifteen thousand against twenty-two thousand men and won a victory * * *," etc. Other evidence of hallucination.

It is interesting to recall, as one of the incidents of this battle, that the late U. S. Minister to Turkey, Judge Alexander Watkins Terrell, of Austin, Texas, got lost from his regiment in a little piece of woods not far from Pierce & Paine College, which is upon an elevation on the south side of the battle-field. Judge, who was then Colonel, Terrell had to meet this accusation when a candidate for the U. S. Senate, in Texas, some years ago. Judge John H. Reagan was the successful candidate. The charge against Judge Terrell was cowardice. I have talked with some Texans who were in the battle and among them, General Hardeman, Superintendent of the Confederate Home at Austin, and received some opinions that the charge was false. Judge Terrell, himself, admits that he became "separated" from his regiment and did not find his way back until some hours afterward, perhaps the next day.

There is no record, so far as I can learn, of any authorized reprimand of Judge Terrell.

Colonel Peck, of the Twenty-third New York Volunteers, did not fare so well; he was dishonorably dismissed under the charge made by Major-General Banks of leaving his regiment and going to the rear during the battle and "did not make proper attempts to rally his regiment while in confusion;" and "was not with his regimental colors or with those of his men who were rallied around them when they advanced upon the enemy," and that "at this time was going to the rear without permission or authority and alone and did not rejoin his command until 2 P. M., the 10th of April, 1864, being absent and from the colors of his regiment about twenty hours, without authority."

The battle was desperately fought and a great many lives sacrificed in a comparatively short time.

Two distinguished officers lost their lives, Col. Lewis Benedict of the New York troops and Col. A. Buchel of Louisiana cavalry. They were both soldiers of splendid courage and their many virtues endeared them to their comrades.

The Childers house, which was made a temporary hospital during the battle and for a few days afterward, for the use of Union soldiers, was relinquished upon request of the owner, to the wounded of the Confederate army, but for a time before the transfer was complete, it was both beautiful and sad to see the soldiers and nurses of the two contending armies in pleasant conversation together, exchanging ministrations and offering up prayers together.

One Confederate soldier who was brought to our house for treatment was Captain Petty of Bastrop, Texas. His case was hopeless and just before his death, upon being told that he could not live, he was raised in his bed and allowed to look out the window for the last time. His eyes fell upon a piece of green sward in the corner of the small yard around the house, near by which stood a large oak. He asked to be buried in that little corner, stating that he did not care to be buried with the other soldiers, as his identity might be lost in the confusion of indiscriminate burial. His request was granted, and to this day the dust of his bones is in that same spot, returned to its native element and now mingled with the soil that made the grass green for his fading vision. The last time I saw this grave, it was unmarked by stone or board, but the neighborhood knew that it was the last resting place of Captain Petty, the bravest of his regiment.*

It takes years to remove the traces of a great battle. Shot and shell and broken bayonets, discarded scabbards, canteens and a thousand relics litter the field for months and years. I was hunting squirrels in the woods in 1871, a mile or more north of the village, and found an army musket in the hollow of a rotten log; the woodwork of the gun was badly worm-eaten and the steel badly corroded. It had no value to me, as a boy, so I left it where I found it.

I neglected to explain that my family felt very indignant that our own people would throw a bombshell into our home. We were told that the commander of the artillery gave the order so as to destroy what he heard was a hospital for

*It is now marked by an appropriate tomb-stone, the only one on all the battle-field.—S. F. B.



THE CHILDERS HOUSE.
Pleasant Hill, La.

wounded Yankee soldiers. This may have appeased our loyalty to the cause, but it was not sufficient explanation for Mrs. Childers, whose humanity was greater than her patriotism, and she pronounced it outrageous that the fortunes of war could justify the destruction of a house dedicated, though temporarily, to humane purposes. The bombshell and the place where it entered the plank ceiling, are still preserved by the grandchildren who lived in the neighborhood.

The Childers homestead was built in the year 1859, by John S. Childers, my grandfather. For many years, this house was known all over northwest Louisiana as being the finest and, for those early times, it might be called expensive, for it cost ten thousand dollars, and this does not take into account the labor which was done by slaves. Mrs. Childers became a widow very soon after the completion of the house, but the reputation for unstinted hospitality that John S. Childers had given his home, remained with it until abandoned by the last owner. Candidates for the highest offices in the State, before the railroads were built, would stop there on their way from Mansfield to other points south, as guests of the owner, and the good cooking which they got put them in a good humor for the rest of their journey.

At the time of the battle, there were only four of the children living: Marion, Eugenia, Julia, and Geo. H. Childers (my father). The latter was engaged in some Confederate government work in the early part of the war, and later joined the army, hence the family was left without a male protector.

It is but simple justice to this lady (Mrs. Childers), the owner of this old landmark upon the battle-field, to state that when the excitement, incident to the battle scene, with its dreadful carnage and its harrowing scenes of human suffering, was rife, her ministrations to all wounded soldiers, whether from North or South, were alike, impartial. She knew no line dividing sections, in that dark hour. They were all, to her, God's creatures. This good woman lived in the old home until her death in 1886, all the while the acknowledged mentor of the religious community and the chief support of the village church. Her name is a household word,

inspiring, even to this day, the noblest sentiments of Christian duty.

I am not able to learn how the village got its name of Pleasant Hill, but it became a village in the early fifties and was the center of refinement and education for miles around. The Childers and Jordans, the Chapmans, the Davises, the Harrells, and the Hamptons, were some of the leading, early settlers of the village. Most of these were wealthy before the war and became poor after the loss of their slaves. These families still live somewhere near the old village.

Nothing remains of the old Pleasant Hill, and I am informed that the main street now forms part of a field cultivated in cotton or corn. The buildings were torn down and moved to Sodus station on the New Orleans & Pacific branch of the Texas and Pacific Railroad, which is called Pleasant Hill by the Post-office Department, in response to a sentiment in favor of preserving the old name.

BATTLE OF PLEASANT HILL, LOUISIANA.

BY WM. H. HEATH.*

The 1st Division of the 16th Army Corps, commanded by Brig. Gen. Jos. A. Mower, to which has been given the credit of winning the battle of Pleasant Hill, was at the extreme rear of General Banks' army when it left Grand Ecore, La., to "go and take Shreveport."

Two divisions of the 13th Corps, under command of Brig. Gen. T. E. G. Ransom, were at the front. The center, composed of troops of the 9th and 19th Corps, moved one day's march behind Ransom's column, and the rear, under command of Brig. Gen. Andrew J. Smith, moved another day's march behind the 9th and 19th Corps, commanded by Generals W. B. Franklin and Emory.

General A. J. Smith's command consisted of two divisions of the 16th Army Corps, known as the left wing of that corps, the first commanded by General Mower, and the second com-

*Late Lieutenant-Colonel 33d Missouri Volunteer Infantry.

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